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ROMAN WOMEN AND THE VOTE

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Suffrage is about realized by the American women and tongues are giving praise to those who brought about the equal standing of the sexes. In many places are heard commendations upon the great efforts of the people of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to obtain the coveted end. But the struggle is an old one. It began, it seems, as far back as 195 years before Christ, in Rome.

Early Roman women, like other women of those olden times, were veritable slaves. Spartan women could inherit property, and were so far removed from the thralldom of husbands and fathers. But in Rome the males were the autocrats of the state and of the family. The father was the Roman woman's master as a girl, the husband her master as a wife. The father could kill deformed children, he could punish his offspring as he pleased, sell them into slavery, and in some cases even order their death. If he willed any of his property to others his children could not claim that part of the inheritance. Before 245 B.C. the wife could not claim part of her husband's estate when he died.

Her marriage was a business affair, arranged by her father and his father, to which her consent was unnecessary. Then, from the bondage of her father she passed to the vassalage of her husband, who could inflict corporal punishment upon her or even put her to death. He was as absolute a lord as the father. He was even absolved from wearing mourning when she died, an otherwise strict law in Rome.

After the slaughter of the Roman legions at Cannae by the terrible Hannibal, Rome feared and shuddered. Signs of mourning appeared all over the city. The senate left no means untried to save the state. They exhorted the people to new efforts and enacted various laws to gain the safety of the people and to secure their co-operative endeavors.

One of the laws, the Oppian Law, had to do especially with women. It aimed at the stifling of domestic strife and class feelings and decreed among other things that no Roman matron should wear any particolored garment, more than one-half an ounce of gold, or ride in a carriage in the city or within a mile of it. Exceptions were made for religious celebrations and it seems that Roman women took advantage of this exception, for it is told of the wife of Scipio Africanus that "when she left home to go to the temple, she seated herself in a glittering chariot, herself attired with extreme luxury. Before her were carried with solemn ceremony the vases of gold and silver required for the sacrifice; and a numerous train of slaves and servants accompanied her."

But when Rome had passed safely through the Punic Wars and had become prosperous by her conquests abroad, the law was still on the statute books. Roman women accordingly determined to regain their lost privileges and found it necessary to take action themselves because the men failed to take sufficient interest in the matter. They succeeded in persuading the two tribunes to propose the abrogation of the law, but to insure its annulment they began to take drastic action.

Their methods aroused the ire of many public men. Livy, the historian, says they would not stay at home by persuasion, by a sense of modesty, or by the authority of their husbands. The women invested the city, flocked to the Forum entrances and besieged the voters to champion their measure. The matter became the subject of universal discussion. The capital was thronged by partisan opponents. Plautus exhibited in the theater a biting satire on the luxury of the Roman women who carried their estates on their backs.

Cato, the consul, who was schooled in the exact life and who abhorred all that was unconventional or not according to rule, was chiefly denunciatory in his harangues. He was the chief opponent of the repeal of the ordinance in the debates that ensued. He derisively asked the women:

Are your ways more winning in public than in private, and with other women's husbands than your own? Yet not even at home ought you be concerned with the laws which are passed or repealed here. Our fathers have

not wished women to manage even their private affairs without the direction of a guardian; they have wanted them to be under the control of their parents, their brothers, and their husbands.

We, by our present action, are letting them go into politics even; we are letting them appear in the Forum, and take a hand at public meetings and in the voting booths. Pray what will they not assail if they carry this point? Call to mind all the principles governing them by which your ancestors have held the presumption of women in check, and made them subject to their husbands. Though they have been restrained by all these, still you can scarcely keep them within bounds. Tell me, if you let them finally become your equals, do you think that you can stand them? As soon as they have begun to be your equals they will be your superiors.

But the women were not without a vindicator. Lucius Valerius was one who saw that the Roman woman was not to be trampled under foot so much as in the past. He did not see that she might ultimately gain the equality that Cato pointed out, but he did feel that she had a right to gain that which was her present due.

"Magistracies, priesthoods, triumphs, insignia of office, the prizes and spoils of war may not come to them," Valerius said. "Elegance in dress and adornment—these are their insignia; in these they delight and glory."

But speeches alone could not win the day for the women. They continued their tactics and not unlike some proponents of the cause of equal franchise today they beset the doors of officials, and ultimately did secure the repeal of the odious law.

The women took some little share in political matters from time to time. We are told that there is an instance of a political poster found at Pompeii which bore the indorsement of two Roman women. Besides the incident mentioned history records another example of the power of the gentler sex in Rome.

It was during the time of the second great political ring in that nation, the Second Triumvirate, composed of Anthony, Octavius, and Lepidus. Two revolutionists, Cassius and Brutus, were giving trouble in the East and the triumvirs felt the need of replenishing the war chest to send an army against the trouble fomenters. They therefore issued a proclamation ordering fourteen hundred of the richest women to make a valuation of their property

that a basis might be set for contributions to the cause. The women appealed to the sister of Octavius and the mother and wife of Anthony but without success.

One of their own number then arose to the aid of the women and for the first time, perhaps, promulgated for her sex the cry of "no taxation without representation." They made their way to the tribunal of the triumvirs where Hortensia, the daughter of the famous orator, spoke in a firm, unquavering voice to that august body, as the spokesman of the women. She declared:

Before presenting ourselves to you, we have solicited the intervention of Fulvia; her refusal has obliged us to come here. You have taken away our fathers, our brothers, our husbands; to deprive us of our fortunes also is to reduce us to a condition which befits neither our birth, nor our habits, nor our sex; it is to extend your proscriptions to us. From the time of Hannibal Roman women have willingly given to the treasury jewels and ornaments. Let war with the Gauls or the Parthians come and we shall not be inferior to our mothers in zeal for the common safety; but for civil wars may we never contribute. Why should we pay taxes when we have no part in the honors, the state-craft, for which you contend against one another with such harmful results?

The women also had their little legislative body, the *conventus matronarum*, which met in the Quirinal, and settled questions of dress, precedence, and the use of carriages.

The professions claimed some few Roman women. Law had a very few, but medicine a proportionately large number. Roman epitaphs which marked physicians' graves indicate that one in ten was a woman. They were recognized by law, for the Code of Justinian speaks of "physicians of either sex." Soranus, writing of women healers, says they must have a good memory, be of robust health, know how to write, and be familiar with dietetics, pharmacy, and surgery.

The story told of how the treatment of woman's diseases came to be recognized by law is an interesting one. Its scene is in Greece but the tale is of moment for Roman history as well. It seems that many women were not disposed to summon male practitioners and some even died because of their aversion to such attention. One woman determined to save her sisters and she, Agnondice, cutting her hair and donning the apparel of a man, after

studying under the great man of medicine, Hierophilus, began to treat the diseases and ills of those of her sex. Her success was unusual and excited the envy of some of the physicians of Athens who made charges against her. When she appeared in the Areopagus she revealed her sex to the judges, whereupon her accusers placed charges against her of breaking the law which forbade women to practice medicine. She would have suffered a heavy punishment if the women she had aided had not intervened and secured the repeal of the law.